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THE TEACHING OF LYRIC POETRY. II¹

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Teachers of literature who handle college freshmen will bear me out, I am sure, in my statement that no small part of our high-school graduates are unable to name and to distinguish the most elementary measures of English verse. Happily, however, I am very sure that the number of such students is growing smaller each year. That every student early in his high-school course should learn the simpler matters of metrics, together with illustrative lines, and should learn them as thoroughly as ever he did his multiplication tables, seems to me so obvious as scarcely to need statement. Furthermore, I am sure the wise teacher will impress upon his classes something of the special values of each of the simpler meters—how the iambic, for certain reasons, has been the favorite with our English poets; how the trochee, “the running meter,” lends itself to a more rapid movement; how the dactyl received its name; and how the anapest has been used to suggest the gallop of the horse. He will also point out the effect of the mingling of these various meters, both in the greater poetry such as “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” and in such lighter verse as Bryant’s “Robert of Lincoln.”

In developing for students the idea of the varying importance of the different syllables in a line of poetry, one may use with effect the device of assigning to each syllable a comparative numerical

¹ Part I of this article appeared in the October number.

value, as is done in Gummere's *Poetics* and elsewhere. Furthermore, no teacher should be ignorant of the chapter on the "Musical Power" in Johnson's *Elements of Literary Criticism*, which emphasizes the difference between meter and rhythm. In bringing out this distinction, one may well begin with Shakspere's Sonnet XXXI, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," and point out, as Professor Johnson has done, how this sonnet possesses a number of very distinct rhythmical movements which throw the emphasis upon certain important words. As another good illustration of this rhythmical movement may be cited Longfellow's sonnet on "Milton," which produces the effect of two immense waves, each gradually gaining power and height, coming to a crest, then breaking and plunging, and finally "flooding all the soul with their melodious seas." Or one may show the class how the opening lines of Shakspere's "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" move monotonously back and forth, much like a beast across its cage, till finally the line "Then in these thoughts myself almost despising," which through its first ten syllables has, so to speak, been sounded on one note, breaks with the added light syllable and mounts with the lark to "heaven's gate." When students understand that the metrical structure is the framework or skeleton which supports the more beautiful rhythmical structure, they have taken an important step toward better reading.

How much time should be spent in discussing the technique of different lines, of stanzaic structure, and of the larger poetic forms, will, of course, vary with the number of lessons at the disposal of each teacher. A certain amount of such study is profitable, even for the high-school student, for he loses no small part of his legitimate enjoyment if he does not understand the rules of the particular game the poet is playing. The student who fails to appreciate the fact that the beauty of Milton's blank verse is due in very great measure to his magnificent ability in ordering his pauses has missed one of the greatest charms of the poem; or, to instance an illustration from the lyric, the pupil should in some measure, at least, be brought to realize how much of the charm of Herrick's "To Daffodils" is due to the exquisite variations of the length of lines and the consequent delicacy of rhythm. Again,

he must be brought to feel the inherent vigor and glow of such verse forms as that of Drayton's "Battle of Agincourt" and should have this idea more firmly impressed by a comparative study of several of the poems employing practically this same stanzaic structure. He should know as well as he knows that five times five equals twenty-five the scheme of the Spenserian stanza and of our two chief forms of the sonnet. Here again, however, let me repeat that these are, of course, only tools, useful ones but of themselves possessed of no more value than are the multiplication tables.

While dealing with these subjects some teachers either require or encourage students to compose verses in the different forms of the lyric. A few years ago Mr. Briggs, then of the Eastern Illinois Normal School, printed in a little pamphlet a number of the best of such verses written by one of his classes. In these pages one finds examples not only of the simpler forms but also of the more difficult French schemes; and many of these verses are so good as to discredit his modest little motto from Dr. Johnson that the wonder is not that the dog dances no better but that it dances at all. While in this matter of requiring or asking verse each teacher must be a law unto himself, I believe that the experiment is well worth the time and effort; for students not only learn something of verse form, but they also gain an increasing appreciation of alliteration and assonance, and experience something of the creative delight in attempting, usually with crude results, it must be confessed, something of onomatopoetic effects.

Through the study of these more minute elements of the poet's musical art must, of course, come no small part of the delight in lyric verse. The skilful use of alliteration, in which Coleridge came so close to perfection, Milton's fondness for alliterations in *w*, Ben Jonson's fine repetition of vowel sounds in his "Hymn to Diana," Poe's

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On the roof did float and flow;
This, all this was in the olden
Time long ago!

Tennyson's "Murmur of innumerable doves in immemorial elms," Freneau's "Lately mourned her murdered mate," and a hundred

others, all suggest a pleasant part of the teaching of the musical quality of the lyric upon which, perhaps, it is unnecessary for us to dwell. Certain poems, such as Dryden's great odes, were written to be sung by a chorus, accompanied by an orchestra; and students grow intensely interested in deciding what should be the distribution of the different sections of the poem among the four voices, and in indicating what would be the most effective musical accompaniment. Furthermore, certain of the simpler lyrics also suggest a very distinct musical accompaniment; even the least musical of the class recognize a difference when they compare the movement of Shakspeare's "Come away, come away, death," with that of "O Mistress mine, where are you roaming." Then, too, if the oft repeated comparisons of Milton's singing quality with the notes of an organ, and of Macaulay's with the blast of a trumpet, be suggestive, may not the student well be asked to hunt some such comparisons for, let us say, Keats, Shelley, and Longfellow? Occasionally it is well to ask how the singing voice suited for such verses as "Come live with me and be my love" would differ from that adapted to Greene's "Sweet are the thoughts." When opportunity offers, and I believe that sometimes it may well be made, the instructor may arrange to have some of these lyrics sung for the class. Such a program of Shakspeare's songs is especially interesting, but best of all, perhaps, is a Burns hour. I have found students quick to value this method of interpretation; and I must confess I felt that a certain class had grown a great deal in the appreciation of the musical quality of the lyric when the students returned from hearing a well known musical setting of "Crossing the Bar" and declared that while the anthem was beautiful, there was something about the music of the verse that the arrangement had not brought out.

In considering the musical power of the lyric, we must not forget the beautiful cadences and suggestive power of particular phrases. Certain lines of poetry, such as some of Poe's lingering, melodious phrases, or Keats's fine

magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn,

haunt us with a music as difficult to describe as it is easy to recognize. How much pathos, too, Keats wrings from that last word "forlorn," one of those great and not infrequent catchwords which he loves to repeat, as here, with somewhat of the effect of an echo. A careful study of the "Ode to a Nightingale" or the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" brings home to the student something of a realization of this immense power for music and beauty potential in the phrase, which made Keats declare he looked upon a fine phrase with the eye of a lover. Even a little training in observing the phrase, such as noting Milton's fondness for inverted order in such groups as "hazel copses green," "sad occasion dear," and "the still morn went out with sandals gray," does much to increase the student's pleasure in the lyric.

In the study of words and phrases the teacher may well devote some time to explaining the difference between denotation and connotation, pointing out how words possess not merely a core of meaning, but also, to use James's convenient term, a fringe of association, and how the words and phrases of the poet are freighted with suggestion. For example, the words of the first two lines of Tennyson's "Bugle Song" are simple enough,

The splendor falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story;

and yet they are potent to suggest the great world of romance. Sometimes this suggestiveness lies in the long roll of proper names, as in Milton's famous lines in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, a passage so wonderfully musical and filled with suggestion of the Orient as to deserve memorizing by every teacher of English. Or, again, a poet may be unable to tell us just what something is; so he suggests its qualities or effects to us through comparisons. Thus Shelley, in attempting to give us the song of the skylark, compares it with the songs of the poet and of the maiden, with the hue of the glow-worm, and with the scent of the rose.

In trying to bring pupils to some realization of a poet's ability to give to common words new beauty and life, I have found especially helpful one stanza from Lowell's "The Shepherd of King Admetus":

His words were simple words enough,
And yet he used them so,
That what in other mouths was rough
In his seemed musical and low.

"Good" is a very common word; yet in his line "To the good memory of Robert Shaw," Moody used it with telling effect. "Slow" is another of these "simple words enough"; but how significant it grows when a master uses it in such a phrase as "thou foster-child of silence and slow time." Nor is it the commonplace in words alone that the poet may permeate with suggestion and life; he may be equally happy in casting a commonplace idea into a final, vital form. Shakspeare, Pope, Gray, and Emerson here suggest a wealth of illustrative material. In this connection one is reminded of the classification of phrases, given in Johnson's *Elements of Literary Criticism*, as dexterous, felicitous, and dynamic. This distinction is frequently very helpful to the student, although, of course, it may be overworked, just as some teachers waste valuable time in classifying figures of speech.

Some time may well be spent in considering the writer back of the poem, and in bringing out students' ideas regarding him. This exercise is especially valuable in sending pupils to a re-examination of their texts and in affording a somewhat different standpoint from which they may view the lyrics they have read. It is obvious that few valuable opinions of authors can be formed from so small a number of lyrics as usually represent most of the poets in Palgrave; and even if the poems be fairly numerous, one must ever consider how far they are indicative of the author's own emotions or beliefs. The latter objection, however, is hardly a vital one, especially if the teacher uses discretion in directing what poems shall be included in such a discussion; while the former may be largely obviated by more extensive reading either by a part or by the whole of the class. Students sometimes do surprisingly well in discussing the range of a poet's verse, and in deciding what subjects brought out his best work. They soon learn to select any passages where the poet has manifested especially delicate and acute observation of nature and of men. In studying Burns's poetry, or such a lyric as Mickle's "The Sailor's Wife," they soon

realize how the author has seen the beautiful and the significant in the commonplace; and I have known more than one student to be thus quickened with a keener sight, a more delicate ear, and a heart more sympathetic with the lives of others.

In trying to discover something of the man back of the verse, we must ever remember that some poets repay such study much more handsomely than do others. Poe, for instance, was very autobiographic in some of his work. When, after a little judicious preparation on the part of the teacher, the student is allowed to find for himself such characteristic passages as the one from the "Raven":

some unhappy master,
Whom unmerciful disaster followed fast, and followed faster,
Till his songs one burden bore,
Till the dirges of his hope the melancholy burden bore
Of never, nevermore—

he has learned a lesson in criticism he will not soon forget. In the case of a writer such as Poe, whose bulk of verse is comparatively small, students soon come to realize that his range of subjects is very narrow, and that he is most thoroughly at home in the "valley of the shadow of death." In the case of a more voluminous writer, such as Whittier, the teacher may, by a judicious choice in the assignment of readings, give the pupils a sufficiently large number of examples from each of the divisions of the Quaker poet's verse to afford them considerable ground for comparisons. For a rapid and frequently very valuable comparison, the teacher may well direct discussion to the numerous little groups of lyrics similar either in tone or in that they deal with a common subject. Thus, with Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to His Love" may naturally be compared "The Nymph's Reply" and Campion's "Fortunati Nimium." The regret with which thoughtful men look back upon their childhood appeals all the more vividly when one brings together, let us say, Vaughn's "Retreat," Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations," Lamb's "We were two pretty babes," and Hood's "I remember! I remember!" Longfellow's "Hymn to the Night" and Shelley's "To-night" offer excellent chances for comparison and contrast, as do also Sidney's, Shakspeare's, and Daniel's

treatments of Sleep. These nineteenth-century poets just mentioned have each written a beautiful serenade worthy of comparative study.

Furthermore, such comparisons of authors of the same age, it goes almost without saying, afford a most vital means of apprehending the characteristics of that particular period. A student may recite glibly enough from a text that "one of the distinguishing features of the Cavalier poetry was a dashing impudence;" but only after he has read "Shall I wasting in despair," "Why so pale and wan, young lover," and "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," and has noticed the similarity of tone, does the "dashing impudence" become anything more than an attractive phrase. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of each of the different periods. It is only through feeling in a dozen different instances the lyric charm of the Elizabethans that the student really begins to know something of their "full-throated ease" of song.

One can scarcely overestimate the importance of combining such extensive reading with the more intensive work. That much careful reading gives a basis for a finer appreciation and a sounder judgment is a truth as vital as it is commonplace. To such reading the student comes with a mind stimulated by the careful work of the classroom; his eye is better trained, and his artistic sense is more fully alive for enjoyment. He begins to discover things, and great is his joy therein. One of the deepest pleasures of teaching comes, I feel, from watching students make such discoveries and from discussing with them these new loves. After all, such results are the permanent and valuable things of our work. If we are spending our time simply putting students through a series of gymnastics based upon Palgrave if at the end of our efforts most of the class leave their *Golden Treasury* never to return to it and enlist among the devoted readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, let us ponder whether we might not be doing greater and more remunerative service by buying a ticket to Texas, there to engage in raising annually four mammoth crops of luscious white onions.

In attracting students to lyric verse, the teacher will sometimes give over the lesson of the day and read to the class from some author he especially admires. Personally I like to spend an hour

bringing before the class such a poet as William Vaughn Moody, whose untimely death we must all deplore; and I have been glad to discover from consulting the library records and the local book dealers that some members of the class have been tempted to learn more of the poet whose name had been to many of them utterly unknown.

One other topic may claim our attention for a moment: What use shall we make of the comments of the critics? Though this question applies with equal force to all the different forms of literature, it is an exceedingly practical one to consider in planning our presentation of the short poem. I am thoroughly convinced that within the last ten years teachers of English have been coming more and more to realize the importance of an honest expression of the student's actual likes and dislikes, and to place an ever-diminishing insistence upon his accepting and repeating the judgments of another. Even today, perhaps, one may find schools where more liberality is still desirable. Occasionally one visits a class where the students preserve the attitude of a little fellow in a Sunday-school class of whom a certain teacher of English delights to tell. In discussing the lesson which dealt with the Commandments, the teacher asked, "Frank, what may a boy rightly do on the Sabbath?" And Frank, ready and anxious to please and to give the answer he thought expected, replied, "Read his Bible and go to Sunday school." It is unnecessary to make the application; but Frank's older brothers and sisters enrolled in the high school and college are entirely too numerous. Respect for the student's opinions, however raw and crude, intellectual honesty and frankness are valuable tonics in strengthening their taste for the best literature. Especially must the teacher emphasize the importance of intellectual and critical honesty when he assigns subjects for written reports. As a rule it is better to ask a class to read more extensively from the authors studied rather than to dip into the critics. Of course an occasional exception to this plan may be expedient and highly desirable. For example, one may well read to his students a part of Matthew Arnold's critical estimate of Gray and then discuss with them the points there raised; or one may select a sentence or two from some famous piece of criticism and ask the opinion of the

class regarding the judgment there expressed. Frequently one may kill two birds with a single stone by bringing into class such tributes as Arnold's to Shakspeare, Wordsworth's to Milton, some of the many verses in honor of Burns, or Longfellow's sonnets on Chaucer, Shakspeare, Milton, and Keats. Frequently such poems serve to give vent to what the student himself has felt but never could have expressed. Thus, too, there are many phrases, such as the "poet's poet" and the "God-gifted organ voice," which have grown so commonplace to the veteran teacher of English that he is almost ashamed to look them in the face as they come around with the revolving years. Let us take heart, however, from the example of the old toymaker, who, when asked why he did not invent some new dolls for Christmas, replied: "My friend, you forget that every year there is a new crop of babies." Of course the wise teacher is adding to his stock year after year through his ever-widening reading, and woe be to him if he does not; but he must remember that such phrases as those just quoted have become little *loci critici*, valuable and almost necessary to the student, however trite to himself.

Occasionally we may well call in the painter's art to assist the student to clearer critical conceptions. From time to time good artists have attempted to illustrate different lyrics. Taylor's illustrations of Longfellow are well known; some good illustrations have appeared from time to time in *Scribner's*, such as those of "L'Allegro" and of "Il Penseroso" if memory serves aright, in the Christmas number of about 1902. Many teachers have used with their classes the Doré illustrations, especially those of the *Ancient Mariner*; and I have known a few teachers who have prepared from them a series of lantern slides. I have been interested, though, in the frequent expressions of disappointment from high-school students upon viewing these Doré illustrations. Frequently they realize that the pictorial art is inadequate to express the suggestion and magical charm of Coleridge's marvelous verses. Once in a while I have asked pupils to point out passages that might be selected by an artist who had received instructions to illustrate the particular poem we happened to be studying. This device gives criticism something of the attractiveness of a game.

Greene's "Sweet are the thoughts that savour of content" and Campion's "Fortunati Nimium" afford capital material for such an exercise.

Then, when the study is completed, when we have done all we can toward helping the student to a better intellectual conception and to a finer emotional appreciation of this species of literature, and have introduced him to as many poets as our time warrants, let him come back to the lyric with added knowledge and power, to read and re-read for the fun of the thing. Let the pupils repeat the lines, stanzas, or lyrics they have come especially to love; and most of them, I know, will close their study of Palgrave with genuine regret. One last word: Be careful in judging just how deeply the emotions of these poets have touched those of the members of the class. I recall one student who was continually looking out of the window till I was tempted to wring his little Teutonic neck; and yet in after years I found that these lyrics had sunk deeply into his heart. It is not always the student who is the liveliest with his hand and glibbest with his tongue that has learned best the value of the lyric.